

Healthcare professionals' perspectives on commercial milk formula marketing in the UK: a qualitative study

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BACKGROUND

- Policies are in place to regulate commercial milk formula (CMF) marketing so as not to undermine breastfeeding e.g., restricting direct-to-consumer advertising.
- Healthcare settings provide an entry point for CMF marketing and so there are also schemes focused on this e.g., via the Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI).
- The perspectives of healthcare professionals (HCPs) regarding existing policies and how CMF marketing impacts their practice are not well understood.

OBJECTIVES

To understand:

- HCPs' perceptions and experiences of marketing of CMF to consumers and HCPs.
- HCPs' perspectives on the regulation of CMF marketing in the UK.

METHODS

- Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with HCPs in the UK with regular contact with pregnant women and mothers.
- Questions focused on experiences of CMF marketing and perceptions of legislation.
- Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo.
- Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with themes developed both deductively and inductively.



M&C Saatchi World Services was commissioned by the World Health Organisation to conduct the interviews in the UK as part of a multi-county study. Analysis and interpretation were conducted independently at UCL.

RESULTS

- 41 interviews were conducted with UK-based HCPs from 2019 – 2021.
- 8 interviews took place face-to-face and the remainder were online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 17% of participants were health visitors, 29% described themselves as infant feeding leads, fully or alongside another role. Other roles included midwives, dietitians, specialist nurses and paediatricians.
- 3 main themes were developed.

Themes

1. 'Industry relationships have changed but not disappeared'

Some HCPs reported that industry no longer contacted them due to the BFI but they believed contact with HCPs in other roles not covered by the BFI had increased.

[CMF manufacturers] leave me alone. But formula milk companies do directly approach paediatricians, in my experience, with what they call information leaflets

Neonatologist, England, female

2. 'Direct-to-consumer marketing presents challenges for HCPs'

To support families to make informed choices about infant feeding, HCPs felt they often had to challenge misinformation they received from the CMF industry.

...it's really frustrating to try to explore with parents about how the message on the box might not actually be keeping up with the current advice.

Family nurse, Scotland, female

3. 'System changes are needed to support informed infant feeding decisions'

HCPs wanted to see policy changes, including effective legislation to restrict CMF marketing to both HCPs and consumers. They also thought greater emphasis on normalising breastfeeding was important.

controlling what [CMF manufacturers] can say...Again, nobody's challenging them, and I think that's our frustration in health. Nobody is challenging these people about what it is they're putting, what these claims are.

Infant feeding coordinator, female

CONCLUSION

HCPs believed industry contact with HCPs not covered by the BFI was problematic and they wanted tighter marketing regulations, including adopting 'The Code' in its entirety, and strategies to normalise breastfeeding.